Interview with Thomas F. Stroock

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR THOMAS F. STROOCK

Interviewed by: Andrew Low

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This is an interview of Ambassador Thomas F. Stroock, conducted on November 27th, 1993 in Denver, Colorado. The interviewee, Thomas F. Stroock is from Casper, Wyoming, is the former ambassador to Guatemala. The interviewer is Andrew Low, his son-in-law.

Q: Okay . . . Ambassador Stroock (chuckles) , Dad-in-law, I'd like you to start by giving a little of your background, first your business background and then your involvement with Wyoming politics.

STROOCK: Well, after I graduated from Yale University back when the Earth was cooling in 1948, I was hired by the Stanolind Oil and Gas Company, now the Amoco Production Company, the producing subsidiary of Standard Oil Company of Indiana. To go to work for them my first assignment was to be an interpreter in the country of Colombia because I spoke Spanish, had taught school for two summers in Havana, and had married a Cuban girl. To get me to go down there of course they had to teach me the oil business because the idea was that I was to interpret for their seismic crews down there. So they put me on a six month training program that carried me throughout the west. First on seismic crews, and then doing some work in the main office in Tulsa, and then on a drilling rig out on the Four Corners of the west where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah come together. I

was there when they had a revolution in Colombia, the famous Bogotazo of '48?, and there were several shots fired at the Stanolind Offices in Bogota and the decision was made to bring the whole company home and to close down their operations in Colombia. So the man who had hired me, George Jenkinson, who was a Yale graduate and had hired me off the campus at Yale, called me and told me there was no job offer. And of course I sounded a little desperate, and I was a little desperate, I had become engaged to be married and committed myself to that on the basis of a job I was going to have there. They were going to pay me all of $298 a month, which was a princely sum in those days. So he called me back to Tulsa and interviewed me and he said, “There's a job in Albuquerque, New Mexico with the company land office there. Will you go to Albuquerque?” and I said, “You better believe I will.” And I went there and then the job moved to Casper, Wyoming, and so I moved to Casper in 1948 and started out in the oil and gas business there.

Q: How long did you stay with Stanolind?

STROOCK: I was with them until January 1, 1952 when I started my own oil business mostly because they wanted to move me out of Wyoming and I didn't want to move. By that time we'd fallen in love with the place and I started out brokering oil and gas leases and then taking pieces of oil and gas lease deals myself and we gradually built up to be one of the more important independent operations in the state of Wyoming.

Q: Were you still in the oil business when you were appointed ambassador?

STROOCK: Oh yes, I've always been in the oil business, but like anything else, you know, I guess it was the training I got at Yale, I've always been interested in civic and political affairs. I've always been reasonably conservative in my political views, and I stared to get interested in civic affairs: the United Fund, chairmanships and community recreation chairmanships and ended up running for the School Board back in 1960, and actually getting elected. A group of young people wanted to make sure that their children got foreign language education, which wasn't offered at the time. The true story about that is

that a group at a cocktail party decided that one of us should run and I left town for a week to go to North Dakota on an oil and gas lease deal, and when I got back one of the people at the party, a young architect by the name of Bob Wehrle had circulated a nominating petition, gotten 25 names on it, gotten everybody to put up a dollar for the 25 dollar filing fee, and had it ready for me to sign when I got home. So I signed, became a candidate, and got elected to the School Board. And of course one thing leads to another in a small state like Wyoming with less than half a million people. When you're on the School Board then you get involved in lobbying the legislature for school finances. That doesn't turn out the way you think it should, so you end up running for the State School Board. I became chairman of that. Then I was angry about the way the legislature had not established a School Foundation Fund as they had promised to do. The Speaker of the House, a man by the name of Joe Budd, personally told me, “Tom, I'll make sure that that Foundation Fund bill passes.” That's what he said to me, but to his colleagues he said, “Don't worry about it, it'll never happen,” and he never brought it up. So the bill died, and—very angry about that—I determined to run for the legislature, precisely to do something about the School Foundation.

Q: Which year did you first run for the legislature?

STROOCK: It was in 1967 that I ran for the State Senate. That year the Senator who represented our county died, Bob Murphy, so instead of running for the State Legislature, I decided to run for the State Senate. There are only 30 state senators. I figured you had twice as much influence as the 64 House members. I ran and got elected, and did serve on the Education Committee, and we did change the Foundation Fund. One thing led to another and I ended up being Republican State Chairman and Chairman of the Joint Appropriations Committee and Vice President of the Senate. I was really very much involved in Republican national affairs when I was Wyoming Republican State Chairman. I was elected Chairman of the Western States Republican Organization and in that capacity was very much interested in promoting the candidacy of a college friend of mine, George Bush, to be President of the United States. “Poppy” as I knew him (it was much easier to

call him Mr. President than George). Poppy was the name that we gave him in school. He was an obvious leader on campus and was obviously going to go someplace. There was the interesting coincidence that he left the campus to go into the oil business too, but in Texas, and professionally or business-wise we never touched clubs.

Q: Was President Bush, later to be President Bush, then George Bush, was he the same year at Yale as you were?

STROOCK: Yes, he and I were classmates and I was a substitute for one year on the baseball team where he was the captain. We took a couple of classes together, and we were friends. I always admired him, and I remember when his political career started, and he was going to run for the United States Senate, from Texas. I went down to a meeting in Dallas. A whole bunch of Yale classmates and friends who were interested in promoting his candidacy were there. Barbara Bush told us that no candidate from Texas would ever be known as “Poppy” and we had to quit calling him that and call him “George.” That was very difficult to do, it was much easier to call him Mr. Vice President or Mr. President. In any event, I got involved early on in Bush's political activities. When he was the National Chairman, I was the State Chairman and I brought him out to Wyoming to address the State Convention. I had an airplane at that time and we flew all around the Western States. We made two tours of the Western States while he was the Republican chairman. It was a way of promoting his future candidacy, and when he ran his first campaign...

Q: You say he was being stationed in the National Chair?

STROOCK: National Chair of the Republican party.

Q: You were...

STROOCK: I was Republican State Chairman. When the campaign got started in earnest in 1976? was when we did all this kind of activity. Then in 1980 was when he really made a run at it. Ronald Reagan was far and away in the lead and George was constantly

playing catch up, particularly in the West. It was no easy thing to be a Bush supporter and delegate in the West because the Reaganites were really tough. While Ronald Reagan was not at all a vicious person, truly a very kind man—his political supporters politically were very vicious and played very tough. They threw at your head and it cost a lot to take after the Reaganites. I started in Wyoming and built the Wyoming Organization and then with Ken Neal up in Montana built the Montana Organization came down to Denver with the Gates family and Wally Forbes' wife and we worked on the Colorado. I ended up being in charge of the Rocky Mountain Region reporting to Jim Baker, who was then running the campaign. We came close and when Poppy Bush became Vice President we stayed in contact. Once I represented him, I think that had to be about 1983 or '84 at a big ceremony in Spain honoring the 200th anniversary birth of Father Junipero Serra who started the California missions. And I was called back to Washington. There was a time there when they were talking to me about becoming Deputy Commissioner of Indian Affairs—which was no job I wanted. I didn't want to live in Washington and I sure didn't want to be in Indian Affairs. I stayed in touch with the Vice President and he with me, and then in 1984 I was as active as one could be. The Reaganites of course took the lead politically in the 1984 reelection campaign. Then in '88 I did the same thing for the Bush presidential campaign I had done in 1980, except this time we were obviously king dog on top of the hill and we had a much easier time of it. For a whole series of reasons George Bush got elected President of the United States, and when he became President begins the tale of how I got to be ambassador.

Q: Let's stop there for just a second. You had mentioned that by this time you spoke Spanish?

STROOCK: Yes, I had spoken Spanish since I'd graduated from college. I took intensive Spanish at college and I taught English and American History for two summers at a school called Ruston Academy in Havana, Cuba and while I was down there doing that I met your mother-in-law, my wife Marta.

Q: And so as a result you've had the opportunity of speaking Spanish all these years and kept it polished up.

STROOCK: Not really. I used Spanish whenever I spoke to Hispanics. There's a large Spanish speaking population in the Rocky Mountain states. I would try—whenever I campaigned politically—to go after the Spanish-speaking vote and generally got it, which used to drive the Democrats who opposed me out of their tree. We would travel frequently to Spanish-speaking countries because it was fun. While I had command of the language, easily read it, my writing of it became rusty and when I got to Guatemala it took me a couple months to get that back. At one point, when I was very young, I could speak Spanish as well as I spoke English. When I left Guatemala I still wasn't back, even after three and a half years down in that country. I still wasn't there because I think an older tongue doesn't put itself around a language as quickly as a younger tongue.

Q: Okay. But you had this facility with Spanish and that was your other language besides English. You didn't speak any other languages, right?

STROOCK: (chuckles) Just curse a lot.

Q: Okay. So let's pick up then with 1988. How did it come to pass that you were...

STROOCK: Well after the election, of course, I called the then President-elect to congratulate him, and he said, well, you know, the usual thing, “I couldn't have done it without all you guys helping,” and “How wonderful you are,” and he said, “I know you wanted to serve in the administration, and I'm going to have Chase (Untermeyer),” whom I knew was one of his assistants and is going to be in charge of White House personnel, “and I'm going to have Chase call you. And I want you to come back serve in the administration.” He was right. I had wanted to serve—with Poppy Bush you never state the obvious...because if you jump up and down and state the obvious and wave your hands and arms and say, “Here I am!” his inclination is to look past you and at

someone else. He doesn't want anybody who wants it too much, and I think maybe I learned something from that. I think that's smart. But there was never any doubt in all the relationship between us that if he ever got to a position like that that I would like to serve in his administration.

So when Chase (Untermeyer) called me two weeks later as they were putting together the transition team, I had to tell him that I felt obligated to delay because of the manner in which the legislature session was headed. I was Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and we were having a terrible fight over the budget. I was very interested in 1) preserving educational finance, 2) raising a welfare scheme called a “family payment plan” and 3) not raising taxes. I thought I had seen a way to do that. I talked to some of my friends and was told if I left everything that I was interested in those areas, then they were going to go down the tubes. Since I felt committed to the Governor and the people who had elected me to at least finish out that term, I felt that I had to go to the Wyoming Session of the legislature in 1989. But I told Chase to tell the President that when the Session was over in March I would be very interested in serving. Untermeyer left it with me that when the Session was over that I should call him and that they were considering me for a position in the Agency for International Development because I spoke Spanish, probably the Assistant Administrator for Latin Affairs. That was in the phone conversation. So the Wyoming Session ended—rather successfully I thought—in March of 1989, and maybe a week after I had gotten home and collected my breath and gotten all the junk off my desk, I called Chase (Untermeyer) in the White House and left word. He called back, and I said, “There is a meeting in Washington that the National Council of State Legislature is putting on that begins in about two weeks—the end of March. It's for the presidents and vice presidents of the Senate and Speakers and the Speaker pro tems the Houses of all the state legislators. It's going to be a leadership meeting, and I'm planning to go with the president of the Wyoming Senate.” Marta and I and Russ Zimmer and his wife Ila, went, and it provided me a perfect opportunity. So we made an appointment for

me to meet with Chase at the White House. At that point he was still talking about the assistant directorship of AID for Latin America.

In the meantime I made some investigations. Tim Stanley, a classmate of mine at Yale who's been very influential in Foreign Affairs and was Chairman of the Atlantic Council, looked into it. The word that I got back was that it was not a position that I would not much enjoy. In the first place I'd have to live in Washington, which wasn't really what I had in mind. In the second place you were constantly fighting for your turf. It was a very “turf-conscious” battle. The Latin America Division of AID was constantly neglected because the big money in AID went to Israel and Egypt. The Treasury Department was constantly trying to take away your area as the increase in commercial activity picked up. Commerce was in your way. It was a deal in which you were constantly fighting off others. The director of AID at the time, a Dr. Brown, was seriously ill. He was known to be dying of cancer, and when he left you had no idea who the director might be. So my question to Chase was, “Chase, I understand all of this. If the directorship becomes vacant, do I have a shot at that job?” He said, “Absolutely not.” He said, “That will not be the president's appointment. That will be an appointment made by Jim Baker, who was then Secretary of State.” And I said, “I know Jim. Maybe I can go talk to him.” And he says, “No, that's not the way it works.”

This was the gist of our conversation. I thought about it and the day I left Washington I called him up and I said, “Chase, that's not a job I'm interested in, and while I appreciate the consideration, thanks an awful lot.” And went home and told Marta on the way back, “Well, that's probably the end of any offer we'll ever get from the Bushes.” I said, “You don't turn these guys down. So I won't hear anymore about it.” A couple of weeks went by and I had the opportunity to go back to the inauguration of Dick Cheney as Secretary of Defense. At the inauguration I spoke to Dick, and he asked, “What are you going to do?” I told him the story. He said, “Well, what would you really like?” I said, “Well, if I really could wave a magic wand, I'd like to be the ambassador to Argentina because I could use my Spanish and I wouldn't have to live in Washington and it's a fascinating, challenging job.” I said, “I don't want to be ambassador in a country where all you do is drink tea and be

social. I want to do something." He said, "Well, let me talk to the President about that and let me talk to Jim Baker because I see them all the time."

So I went back to Wyoming and about a week later—this is now about the second week in April—the phone rang and it was the President on the phone. He said, "Dick has talked to me and I've talked to Jim," and he said, "We'd like to have you serve as an ambassador." He said, "The trouble with the one you want is—I understand the one you want is Argentina—the trouble with that is that one of the most senior Foreign Service officers on the professional staff, who also happens to be black, is a man by the name of Terence Todman, and he has already been picked by the Department to have that job, and I don't want to disturb that situation." He said, "But would you consider either Uruguay or Guatemala?" I said, "Well, Mr. President, of course I would be happy to consider it." He said, again, "Get in touch with Chase." So again I got a hold of Tim Stanley, and he scouted among his friends and he said that Guatemala would be fascinating. It was a difficult country with a lot of problems. There was a guerrilla war going on. There were ethnic and racial considerations. It was close to the United States and yet a scene of great turmoil. Whereas Uruguay was a long ways away; it was very placid, much smaller, and there wasn't nearly as much that was challenging to do. If it was his choice—if what I wanted was a fun job and to go to wonderful beaches, I should go to Uruguay, but if what I wanted was a job with a challenge, I should go to Guatemala. So I called Chase Untermeyer and said, "Well, if I have a choice, the choice I would make is Guatemala, but of course I would take either one." I didn't want to put myself into a position of being the dog in a manger again. The next day I got a call from Chase saying, "The President is going to nominate you to go Guatemala; you can't say anything to anybody." And I said, "Well, I have to talk now to my wife about this." He said, "Well, the President's going to call. . ." and I said, "I'll talk to her tonight." So at eight o'clock in the morning I got to the office, having talked to Marta late into the night and having agreed we would do it. And the phone rang and it was the President, who knows Marta. He said, "Well, I know you talked Marta into it so I want you to do this and come back, and I'm pleased you're going to do

this.” Marta and I had planned a one week vacation at Windemere Island in the Bahamas, leaving in about three days, and I said, “Mr. President, does it make any difference to the administration and you if Marta and I go on this one week vacation? It's liable to be the last vacation we get for a while, I would think. And then I'll come down to Washington.” And he said, “No, that's fine.” But he said, “Can you keep your mouth shut?” and I said, “Not only can I keep my mouth shut, but if I'm out of the country, no one's going to know about it.” So we went to the Windemere Island. Alan Simpson, our United States senator and dear good friend had been trying for months to get some Wyoming people appointed to positions. Actually to go back a long way, I had introduced Alan to President Bush when Alan was a new senator and Bush was a new Vice President, and they became very, very dear friends. They became better friends one of the other than I of either. Alan had been working on the President on my behalf. Alan couldn't stand it when he found out. He had to tell somebody, and he told Peter Wold, a young oil man from Casper who was visiting him. Peter got back to Casper, and pretty soon in Casper the word was all over that I was going to be the appointed ambassador. But they had the countries all wrong and they didn't know where. In the meantime Marta and I are out of the country and not supposed to say anything about it to anybody. When we got back on the 28th of April the President made the official announcement of his intention to appoint me, and I started to wind up my business affairs. That's how it happened.

Q: Okay, I'd like to go back and pick up one point that I didn't ask you about. Of course, you hadn't had a career in the Foreign Service, but my recollection from all the years that I've been associated with your family is that you've always had an Interest in American diplomatic history.

STROOCK: Oh, I love American history, but that's because when I was in Loomis School in Windsor, Connecticut a History teacher by the name of Lou Fowles excited my imagination with history. I've always read all I could about American history.

Q: So at the point where you had been appointed now, or nominated as the U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, had you had any opportunity to read about the history of that region?

STROOCK: Oh, well, I—sure, sure. I remember once when I was in college writing a paper on the Monroe Doctrine. Was I any expert on Latin American affairs? Hell no. Had I read about it and studied about it? Yes, and I've lived, as I said, two summers in Cuba. I had some firm opinions about how screwed up our relations with Cuba were and how they had gotten that way largely because of our own errors and not because of force of events. There's no room on this tape, but I know something about how Castro came to power in Cuba, and he came into power because we screwed up. He could have been a friend of ours had we played it intelligently instead of being an enemy for these past 37 years.

Q: I'd also like you to talk for a minute or two about your management style as you developed it from running your own business and what thoughts you had as you were going into the process now of running a much larger organization in Guatemala.

STROOCK: Well, I learned about management from my time in the United States Marine Corps. And then when I got this job and found out that the Guatemalan Embassy was huge, over 800 people. It was the “regional” sort of embassy for most of the regional Central American officers were there. I went to a friend of mine named Rod Kinski who managed an enterprise that started out as a small dairy in Wyoming and became a huge multi-state enterprise called “Mini Mart.” I got from him his library on basic management. I had graduated in Industrial Administration at college with courses in management, so I went back and read some of the old textbooks that I had down in the basement. And my basic management style is to 1) set an example: I naturally work hard. I get up early and stay late, 2) to clearly set out the job to be done with the person involved: Do you understand it? Do you know what we want to do? What is your time frame, and give yourself lots of time. Don't tell me you can have it by the 15th if there's no way in hell you can have it by the 15th. If you think you can have it by the 20th, give yourself a few days

and say the 25th, but I expect then for you to do the job—I don't care how you do it, but I expect it done on the 25th. I've operated that way in small organizations and learned from reading that that would probably translate very well to larger ones. My style was pretty much: “This is what you're expected to do, this is when you're expected to do it, and I want it on my desk by such and such a time. If you're not having any problems I don't expect to hear from you. If something comes up that you don't think you can handle, get back to me.” I used to tell the staff all the time that I don't like surprises. If something goes wrong I want to know, and if you think we need to change course I want to know that, too. It seemed to work in private enterprise, and as the story will unfold, I think it worked very well in Guatemala.

Q: I also want to take just a second because you mentioned that you learned some of your management from the Marine Corps and I'd like you to just take a minute or two and recap your career in the Marine Corps. That was during World War II, wasn't it?

STROOCK: Well, yeah . . . I never got to be an officer. The highest rank I ever had was Platoon Sergeant in the Marine Corps, but I saw how the Marine Corps worked. I saw how authority was delegated and how the lieutenant didn't have time to worry about the details of how the platoon sergeant did his job. He just wanted the platoon ready, present and accounted for at 0600 hours equipped in such and such a manner, ready to do such and such a job.

Q: Just take a minute or two and give us the dates that you were in the Marine Corps and where you were assigned for duty.

STROOCK: I was in (God when did I get in?) in 1943 after my freshman year, I went into the Marines, and I went to Paris Island in June of that year. And then I was in the 10th Marine Artillery Regiment of the Second Marine Division and joined them on the West Coast. We went to Auckland, New Zealand where we staged for Guam. Then we were in Guam, Saipan and Tinian. And then my name with about 4,000 others dropped out

of the old IBM card record files as having an IQ of x, whatever x was, and one year of college. And they shipped us back to the United States to go to Platoon Leaders Class in preparation for the attack on the Japanese home islands which, thank God, never occurred or I probably wouldn't be here.

Q: Now I think we were at the point where you had now been nominated as ambassador to Guatemala. Rather than going over the whole confirmation process, if we have time maybe we can come back later and pick that up at the end, but perhaps it would be best at this point to jump to the point at which you were confirmed and then cover the preparation period when you were getting ready to actually go to Guatemala.

STROOCK: Well once I was confirmed, I was in Guatemala ten days later. There wasn't much there, the preparation all came before. After I was nominated, they sent me to what I laughingly call “charm school.” Well before I did that, of course, they had the usual investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department Security. And there are a hundred funny stories to tell about that. A favorite is that the guy came to me afterwards, and he said, “I haven't had one person say a bad thing about you, Senator (because I was a State Senator at the time).” But he said, “Everybody agrees that the President would have been better off if he named your wife instead of you.” (Andrew Lowe laughs)

And the other one that's my favorite is my great pal, John Hilsom, who has since unfortunately passed away, was interviewed in his office in New York, and afterwards he sent me a telegram. He said, “Unpack your bags. They have just interviewed me. You aren't even going to be able to get on the bus to Guatemala!” (laughs)

Then we went to what I call “charm school,” which was fascinating, and there were a hundred stories about the...

Q: What is “charm school?”

STROOCK: It's the Foreign Service Institute's course for ambassadors. Everybody who's going to go out as the United States ambassador, has to go through this. It was then three weeks—I think it's now two weeks because they've shortened it—but the last week that they've shorted was the most fascinating one. It was the one on security. You went down to New Brunswick, Georgia to the Federal Law Enforcement Academy down there. “FLETC” they called them, and took courses...

Q: What were the other subjects that they taught in “charm school?”

STROOCK: They teach you about how the State Department is organized. Since it's constantly being reorganized you have to learn about that. They give you courses in all the basics that are needed to be an ambassador. It's fascinating that some of the old hands who were coming back, for instance Paul Cleveland, who'd been the ambassador in New Zealand and was going out as ambassador to Malaysia, said that he found it fascinating. George Sotirhos, who'd been the ambassador to Jamaica and was going out now to Greece, found it fascinating—Certainly we did. We made good friends with Paul and Mary Lambert, who had been named to go to Ecuador, and to Loret Miller Ruppe had been named to go to Norway, we to Guatemala. One of the interesting people in our class was a girl—a lady—by the name of Joy Silverman, a handsome young woman from New York, who never got confirmed. She really lacked an education, but with her personality she would have been an excellent ambassador to the Barbados. But it's probably lucky she didn't get named because a couple years later, she'd had an affair with a man by the name of Wachtler, who was the Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court. He had threatened her and her child, and there was an awful, terrible, horrible, scandalous lawsuit that fell on her.

Q: (Saw Watler?)

STROOCK: Wachtler? Was that his name? It was all over the pages of The New York Times. He threatened to kidnap her daughter. Joyce got divorced from her husband, Jeff

whom we met, and so probably it worked out well that the Congress refused to confirm her.

Q: What other preparation did you have for going to Guatemala besides "charm school?"

STROOCK: Well, you are appointed a consultant to the Department, you're brought into the Department and put down at the Guatemala desk, and you "read in," as they call it, everything there is to read about Guatemala and its history. I was really fascinated by it, spent a lot of time doing that. You read the cables. . . I spent the three weeks in "charm school," and I spent two periods of two weeks actually in the Department at the Guatemala desk. The other thing you do is that you have to go around to the Congress, the Senators, and introduce yourself so that you have a chance to meet one on one with the Senators who are going to be important to your confirmation and who are either going to vote for you or vote against you. I had a fascinating time doing that.

Alan Simpson particularly was very, very helpful—Malcolm Wallop was helpful in one incident: Staffers—and I can go on for hours about staffers to Congressmen—but they're terribly important in the confirmation process, and one of the staffers, on Jesse Helms' staff, a young lady by the name of Deborah DeMoss had taken it into her head that, because I was pretty well-known in Wyoming as Pro-Choice in the argument over women's rights, therefore I was pro-abortion, and therefore I was not suitably equipped to be the representative of a conservative administration in Latin America. Well, just because I'm Pro-Choice doesn't mean I'm pro-abortion, I think it has to do with individual rights. She was giving me unmerciful Hell and Jesse Helms was threatening to hold up my name, and Malcolm Wallop, who was one of Jesse Helms very good friends, spoke to him on my behalf. Then, Senator Jesse Helms, invited me to come over and meet him personally at the Senate. He escorted me up to the Senator's personal visitor's gallery and sat with me and told me in his charming liquid southern accent that any friend of Malcolm's was a friend of his, and that he would do everything he could to push my nomination through. Since he was the ranking Republican on the committee, he did. And I had very little trouble

getting nominated, except we could never get the damn committee to sit still to hold nomination hearings. The nomination process has gotten lengthy, sloppy and nasty.

Q: The confirmation process?

STROOCK: The whole process by which the Senate confirms the president's nominations. A raft of us were held up, not because of any feeling on the part of senators that we were or weren't competent. They were willing to confirm us as individuals, but they had fights with the administration over totally extraneous matters: committee jurisdictions, bills that involved countries that we were never connected with. One of the things that I'm doing now with the Council of American Ambassadors is try to see if Council can't bring some decency, sanity, and time reference back to the nomination process. Frankly, I was non-controversial, yet it took from May until October to get a non-controversial person confirmed—that's six months. Now it's taking a year. The confirmation process is ugly and unfortunate and needs to be speeded up. It needs to be focused on the rabbit and not only on extraneous bushes in which the rabbit might hide.

Q: Did you have any meetings with the President before you went down to Guatemala?

STROOCK: Yes. This is after I was confirmed. My hearing was on September 22nd and my official swearing in was on October 10th, and we got to Guatemala on October 18th. Between October 10th and October 18th we went through Washington to pick up all the final documents and instructions. A lady at the State Department named Sharon Bisdee who's marvelous, handles all of this, and she'd been working with me since my actual nomination back in May. One of the things she organized was an interview with the President in the Oval Office: that was exciting and fun. Marta and I went there and, of course, the President knew us personally, it was very warm and very cordial. He had a photographer there, taking pictures, and when Marta came in, he bent down to kiss her. Marta moved her head so that he would kiss her on one cheek and he moved his head so that he would kiss her on the other cheek. Their foreheads bumped, and the photographer

got a picture of that. The President sent it to Marta with a note in it in his own handwriting on the bottom which said, “Dear Marta, Oops! Your friend, George.” He was very kind and generous with us.

We spoke very little of substance at the time. He told me that I would be getting my instructions in writing, that I had already received instructions of the State Department, which I had—I had long conversations with Bernard Aronson, the Assistant Secretary of State who had been confirmed in June and was grabbing hold of the Inter-American Bureau called “ARA” in State Department parlance. Mostly what he said was, “If you need me, call me.” I had his private number and I knew his secretaries from previous political lives. As I best remember he told me to remember that Guatemala is crucial to our entire Latin American program, and our Latin American Program is to expand trade there and to become really good neighbors. He was really concerned about the war on drugs, he was very concerned about the interdiction of drugs, and he was very concerned about the coming election in Guatemala. This now is in October of 1989, and there is an election coming up in Guatemala in exactly one year—in October of 1990. The President was concerned that the existing democratically-elected regime headed by Vinicio Cerezo, turnover control of the country to a legitimately, democratically-elected government. He was very strongly promoting democracy and very strongly promoting the control of drugs in Central America. Those were the substantive conversations we had.

Q: Just for anyone who may be listening to this tape, part of our instructions are that any time we use State Department lingo, we're supposed to say what it means. So you used the phrase, ARA. Would you say what that means?

STROOCK: American. . . Republics. . . Agency. I never did understand—It's the Assistant Secretary of State for (Inter-American) Affairs, and how that gets translated to “ARA”—I believe it's “American Republics Agency.”

Q: And you said Bernard Aronson was about to become the head of that?

STROOCK: He had been nominated, confirmed in June. Bernie Aaronson was the only Democrat in the Republican political hierarchy in the State Department, and he had been named Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs.

Q: Okay, and had you already met with Mr. Aaronson before you met with President Bush?

STROOCK: Oh yes. I met Bernie early on when I first got there in June it was just before his confirmation process, and he was there on sort of an advisory capacity. There was no one in the Assistant Secretary's chair.

Q: Did he give you a substantive briefing before you...

STROOCK: Oh yes. He and I had several conversations over the course of that summer, both before and after my attendance of the school and then while I was down on the Guatemala desk and I came up to a couple meetings in his office that dealt specifically with Guatemala. Q: Can you list what things were high on his agenda? Issues for Guatemala?

STROOCK: Quite frankly I'm the guy who established the agenda of issues for Guatemala. The big problems in Guatemala when I got there were the concern about drugs; the concern about the two attempted coups from the military, were going to try to take over from the facade, of democracy that the country had; and the fact that the country's economy, which had been very sound, seemed to be teetering on the rocks, they were headed for big-time inflation; and, as well endemic corruption down there was a concern.

Guatemala had always been a spot that the United States could count on because we had supported their military regimes, and as long as the military regime worked with us, we were prepared to tolerate the excesses of that regime. We were very concerned about Soviet influence in Central America. When I got there in October of 1989 the Soviet influence in Central America was still a major concern. Aronson's mission when he came

on board was to take over the Nicaraguan situation and put the contra situation off the map; to stop fighting with Congress over what we should do in Nicaragua; to withdraw as best as might be from the support of the contras; to promote as best we could some kind of a reasonable solution to the horrible situation in Nicaragua. It was infecting and poisoning our relationship with Congress about all of Latin America. Aronson's job was to calm those waters; and he did it very effectively. His policies towards Guatemala were all aimed at, “If we do this in Guatemala, how will that reflect back on the Contra-Sandinista war in Nicaragua, and what will the effect be on our position across all of Latin America. All these relationships were very complex.

General Werner had been named the head of Southern command in Panama. General Werner was an extremely able officer, but in Panama there was this terrible problem with Manuel Noriega. He was the Panamanian army officer who at one time had been on our CIA payroll but had become a drug overlord and a gangster. Panama was the center of drug traffic, and thus was the center of terrible problems for the United States in many ways. While the sentiment in the Bush administration was that we had to use physical force to take Noriega out, Werner didn't want to do that. He felt that would reflect back badly on Nicaragua. Secretary of State Jim Baker and Aronson believed that they had to act firmly in Panama, otherwise the Nicaraguans would think they could get away with anything and probably would try to get away with anything, might even try to ally themselves with Noriega.

So the first casualty—and I saw it firsthand while I was in the Department—was that they removed General Werner from command, rather abruptly as a matter of fact, from Southern Command, and placed General Maxwell Thurman in his place. Max Thurman and I got to be friends, and Max got to his job in Southern Command just about a week or two before I go to my job in Guatemala. It was interesting to watch him inter-act with Bernie Aaronson. They changed what had been a policy of banging heads with the Congress, into one of, “How can we accomplish what we want to accomplish with the Congress; keep Soviet influence out of Central America; and still interdict drugs and

still promote democracy." That was the stew that was bubbling and cooking for Central America the whole time I was in Washington.

Q: You've listed a number of broad topics that sound like they were major issues at the time you arrived in Guatemala, and if I could summarize maybe you could add to my list if I've missed some: drugs, attempted coups in the past, the shaky status of democracy in Guatemala, the Guatemalan economy, and the somewhat shaky nature of the economy and corruption as a defect of the Guatemalan economy and corruption as a defect of the Guatemalan economy, the upcoming election in October of 1990, the inter-relationship between our relations with Guatemala on the one hand and our relations with Nicaragua on the other hand and all of Latin America, and the developing problems with General Noriega in Panama.

STROOCK: There was another development in the stew that one had to take into account: and that was the long guerrilla war that started in 1960. There were at the time as many as many as five thousand and perhaps as few as one thousand guerrillas still active in the high mountains in the Altiplano of Guatemala. They were the leftovers from what had been a very dangerous guerrilla movement that almost succeeded in taking over the country in the late '70's and early '80's. As we sit here and speak there are still remnants of that guerrilla movement shooting up people in the jungles and the high mountains, occasionally blowing up bridges and destroying electric towers. The guerillas are increasingly marginal to Guatemala future, but there really will be no important forward movement in Guatemalan society until that guerrilla war is brought to a close. all the issues that you just listed are impinged on by that guerrilla war, so an attempt to do something to shut down the guerrilla war was also in the mix of concerns that the United States had and still has.

Q: Maybe the most orderly way to do this would be to take these subjects one at a time and to track through your experiences in the three and one-half years that you were in Guatemala subject by subject, and of course as we go there'll be inter-relationships. I'll let

you choose—but you know we had drugs, the political problems, the upcoming election, the guerrilla war, the general relationship with Nicaragua...

STROOCK: When I first got to the State Department everybody was busy with their own particular piece of the Central American pie, and nobody had truly concentrated on the slice of the pie that said, “Guatemala.” The “Guatemala” piece in the puzzle was still to be solved, and I rapidly realized that no one was going to do it except myself. So while it was “studying in”, I decided that I would try and keep things simple—in accordance with that management style that you mentioned—try to concentrate on what in Spanish came to known as “los Quatros D's,” “The Four D's,” They were drugs—of course not for drugs, but against drugs, democracy, development, and human rights. Human rights doesn't begin with “d” in English, but it does in Spanish, (”d...”). And drugs is (”drogas,” and democracy is “democracia,” and development is “desarrollo...”). So you can call them the “Four D's” in Spanish, and we did.

In my opening statement at the airport when I arrived and in my opening speech to the mission—which I called an “all hands on deck” speech, and in my opening conversations with President Cerezo, I concentrated on the “Four D's”. I made them our keystones and I would constantly refer to them. It got to the point where people wanted to throw up when they heard me talk about them. But they did become the focus of the mission, and we did, I think, make progress in all four areas.

Q: Let's take one “D” at a time. You want to start with drugs?

STROOCK: Well, drugs was the one that most directly affected the average citizen in the United States. There were two drug problems in Guatemala. The first was the actual cultivation of the poppy flower in the narrow high valleys of the Northern Altiplano, the ones in Guatemala that lead up northward into Mexico. They're very deep; they're very narrow; they're ideal for cultivating poppy. The small farmers take the poppy seed out to Mexico where it's chemically treated and becomes heroin. We found only two chemical

installations, you couldn't even call them laboratories, that would turn the poppy into crude heroin in Guatemala itself. Mostly what happened was that the poppy plant was picked, placed on mules and taken on back dirt roads up to Mexico to be treated and turned into heroin there.

We were very involved trying to stop all this when I got there. We had our own air force of six helicopters and six thrush airplanes, all under private contractors reporting to the Drug Enforcement Agency, the DEA, to fumigate, poison and eradicate poppy seed. We used to make large claims about how many acres of poppy we had eradicated. I went along on a couple of these airplane spraying trips. I never went in the thrushes because they would dive down into those valleys, and I wasn't sure they were ever going to come out. Those thrush pilots were brave guys. They would go into every valley and spray. I did go twice in the helicopter gunships flying up above as protection and looked down. Negotiating these efforts was tricky. An American plane had been shot down over Nicaragua running contraband to the contras. They didn't want the same thing to happen in Guatemala, which was why the U.S. armed forces never were involved. It was a very inefficient way to operate, but nevertheless that's the way it had to be. We had to secure permission from the Guatemalan government to allow us to run these secret contract operations in their country. We had to base the plane's pilots on Guatemalan air force bases, and we needed the cooperation of the Guatemalan army. Well the Guatemalan army is a part of the problem, not part of the solution in Guatemala. While they were and are very constructive and necessary to us in the war on drugs, they also are one of the big threats to growing democracy. They are one of the great causes of the violations of human rights endemic in the country. Some of them were part of the drug organization. They have an enormous influence on the country's ability in every area because they are forty three thousand of them, they're disciplined, and they are the only agency in the country that really works. We can get into that later, but in many of these small, unstable societies it takes the military to make things happen—no other agency, public or private, has the necessary money or organization or manpower.

In any event they were the only people we had to work with. In the three and a half years we were there I desperately tried to move our drug enforcement dependency from the army to a civilian police force—the ("Guardia Civil"), the treasury agents. As I left we had succeeded in establishing some basic treasury organizations that were involved in seeking out those who would transport drugs and contraband into Guatemala, which was the second problem. We never succeeded in getting our program of spraying and fumigating and trying to kill poppy plants away from the necessity of cooperating with the Guatemalan army. We absolutely needed their logistical bases. We couldn't operate without them. We needed their permission to fly over the country because we couldn't do without that. We needed frequently to call on them for repairs to our equipment. They could have shut us down overnight, and they frequently threatened to do just that.

Q: Did they ever demand concessions in return for permission to operate?

STROOCK: That was the whole fight. My frequent conversations with the various officers in the Guatemalan army almost always carried the implied threat of cooperate or your drug effort will suffer. When we cut off military aid in December of 1990, which is another story, the thought was that we had just blown the poppy interdiction program because the military would shut it down. They didn't because we were working with them through the back door of the Central Intelligence Agency, which is again yet another story. But in our relationships with all Guatemalan government officials, and with the army in particular, we had constantly to keep in mind that we were interdicting and fumigating poppies in San Marcos province, at their sufferance, and they could shut down that program at any time. The farmers whose poppy was being fumigated didn't like it at all. There was a tremendous uproar all the time claiming that we were destroying and causing peasants to lose their legitimate crops, none of which was ever proven and none of which was true. Nevertheless at least once a month we got a complaint about that. It was a very involved and dicey situation.

Q: Was there any other aspect to the war on drugs in Guatemala other than eradicating poppy fields?

STROOCK: Yes. The biggest part of our drug problem was that Guatemala increasingly became a way station for transmitting cocaine from South America into the North American market. The coca plant itself is principally grown in Peru. It is shipped into Colombia where it is made into cocaine. Then the Colombians want to bring it into the United States. They used to bring it up in boats through the Caribbean, but our naval interdiction efforts in the Caribbean got very efficient, so they started shipping through Guatemala. The whole time I was in Guatemala we had five United States Navy cruisers with radar and antenna and support, cruising off the coasts of Colombia attempting to track drug flights in airplanes and speedboats, leaving Colombia. They would come up to Guatemala and Mexico then transship and the cocaine would go up into the United States. Guatemala was an ideal place to do that because of the large farms, the large banana plantations, the large coffee fincas, the large sugar ingenios, and the large cattle ranches all had air strips. It was easy to drop into these air strips and transship from planes to either mules or human beings or trucks or other airplanes.

To patrol this interdiction effort we had a very large DEA presence in the embassy. We had a Guatemala City Office Chief, five DEA agents and two pilots. There was constantly the desire to expand the operation and to make the DEA bigger. We had something called “Operation Cadence,” which had its own staff of people who were rotated in and out of Guatemala. The whole time we were there, I think we seized a total of maybe sixty tons of cocaine. Our biggest haul was one haul of about thirteen tons as I remember, which was towards the very end of my stay there. This caused a Colombian hit team to come into the country, so we heard, to try and kill me. This was why in my last month there, I made public appearances with a flak jacket on, which was very uncomfortable and very damned unpleasant. We were successful, I think, in training the Guardia Civil—the Treasury—Police to become effective in this area. We did succeed in getting the extradition of five

drug traffickers under extradition treaties. That was an enormous political effort to get that to happen. We did have pretty good information on drug trafficking, and drug interdiction across all of Latin America became the number one mission of the United States Southern Command after Noriega was taken out of Panama, and after General George Joulman became the commander in chief of Southern Command succeeding Max (Thurman). That was the mission that George seized on as being the most effective thing he could do. I had several meeting with him, several in Guatemala and two in Panama where we got to be friends. George was right because he said, of all the things we did, this was the one that would affect most on American society and therefore justified the American taxpayer dollars being spent. He was hopeful that we could make a serious dent in the drug transshipments.

I wonder if we ever did. I am convinced after three and a half years that we did not win the war on drugs. It's still going on, and I think we're losing. I think we need to do something else, but at least a quarter of my time as ambassador was spent dealing with the interdiction problem, with the cultivation problem and with the extradition problem.

We would try to stop the poppy from growing, we would try and interdict the flow of cocaine through the country, and we would try and find out the people who were involved with it and extradite them to the United States. Sometimes we weren't even so delicate or diplomatically nice as to extradite them. There was a Nicaraguan citizen, a known drug Kingpin, named Gadea, who came into the country. We knew he was coming and we got the Guardia Civil to nab him as he got off the plane, and we got them to put him on a special plane that was flown down by the United States Marshal for Florida where there was a warrant out for his arrest. All of this was done outside the extradition treaty, because he was an undesirable alien. This was legal except the Guatemalans, in their hurry, forgot to go through all the legal steps they had to do through the court. Where that guy is today, I don't know, but we got him out.

Q: When you say, “Got him out,” you mean you got him onto the airplane...

STROOCK: Got him on the airplane and into the hands of the U.S. court in Florida.

Q: So he was arrested in court?

STROOCK: That's right. We legally extradited under a very complicated extradition treaty. it takes months to do. Some important figures, including Arnoldo Vargas, the mayor of Zacapa and a key figure in the old Cali cartel, a known murderer, a real thief had controlled (Zacapa) province for years. He had been involved in transshipping cocaine for years, and we proved it. We got him, we extradited him to the United States under the extradition treaties; and we got four others as well. Sue Patterson the Consul General, one of the most dynamic ladies I've ever met—she was not only attractive, but very bright and very hardworking; was crucial in getting those guys, and the Guatemalans were fascinated by having this very attractive, bright, petite American woman really pounding on their tables to get these extraditions accomplished. Again with the management theory we discussed, I would go with her when she wanted me to, and she would want me to go when it got really sticky with the Army. Otherwise she did it alone and she deserves a lot of credit.

So we did make a difference in the war on drugs, but it did take up a lot of time, and we didn't make enough of a difference. We won some battles, but we never did win the damn war, and I don't know if the war is winnable.

Q: Was the war on drugs linked in any way with the corruption problem in Guatemala?

STROOCK: Yes. Unfortunately, half the history of small Latin American nations is one of corruption, and drugs brought in a tremendous amount of money that flooded through the country. The claim in Guatemala was that the guerrillas were using drug money. The second president that I had to deal with, Jorge Serrano, used to claim that all the time, but he wasn't always right. I'm sure that there was some drug smuggling going on with the guerrillas, but the biggest amount of the drug smuggling that was going on was with the

rich new entrepreneurs and the army, and we never could find out where that was done because they were very clever, very well connected and very organized.

Q: When you say, “going on with the army,” do you mean the army was actually cooperating with the transshipping of drugs?

STROOCK: No the army as an institution was actively cooperating in suppressing it, but individual army officers and soldiers were bought indeed. There's no question about it.

Q: What were they actually being bribed to do?

STROOCK: Yes, to look the other way or help as drugs were transshipped in all parts of the operation. Many of our pieces of our information led us to believe that lower ranking army officers—majors, lieutenants colonels—were involved. Cerezo turned a deaf ear to that, but Serrano, the second president was a strong, born-again evangelical Protestant—really hated that idea in his guts. He really moved heaven and earth to try and shut it down, but even he wasn't successful. We got our best cooperation from Serrano in this area of drug interdiction.

Q: When you talk about “shut it down,” are you talking about shutting down corruption or shutting down drugs or both?

STROOCK: Shutting down drugs. Serrano himself was terribly corrupt, so he wasn't at all good at shutting down corruption, but he did want to try and shut down drug trafficking, and yet it didn't happen. The huge amount of money available through drugs was a big part of the large corruption problem in Guatemala. Many money laundering operations took place. We held classes trying to train the financial institutions in the country how to recognize and handle money-laundering, but we never really did a good job because we don't know how to handle it ourselves.

Q: Did you speak out at any time about corruption?

STROOCK: Oh Lord, it got to the point where I think they were tired of it. I started out by saying that Guatemalans made a business out of , hell an art, out of not paying taxes. I would say that they couldn't expect United States taxpayers to support activities in their own country that their own taxpayers refused to support. I would talk about corruptions in generalities because there are some things that as an ambassador that you just can't say. To remain effective, you couldn't say that you were convinced the president was corrupt. You just couldn't do that. I had to maintain a relationship with him. I really had to try and be his friend. But you could say that some of his friends were involved. The first big drug incident that I got involved in, shortly after I arrived there, illustrates this conundrum. The President, Cerezo, appointed one of his buddies, a former colonel by the name of Hugo Moran, as director of the port of Santo Thomas. Just before I arrived in Guatemala, Hugo Moran had been involved in a drug transshipment at La Aurora, the main airport of Guatemala. He and two of his cronies were involved in drug trafficking up to their eyeballs. The CIA, the intelligence station, and the DEA, the drug enforcement agency, had the proof. They even had pictures of these guys carrying the stuff out of the airport. To get Moran out of the town, Cerezo named him as the chairman of the Port of Santo Thomas, which is the country's leading port. Eighty percent of the country's imports and exports go through there. A lot of drugs are transshipped. This was just an open license to conduct illegal activities. Many of our officers believed that President Cerezo himself was involved because his brother definitely was.

Q: It was like putting a fox in charge of the henhouse...

STROOCK: Exactly! So I went to the president and spoke to him about it. I made a special trip down there to the palace for that purpose only. We would have breakfast once a month—and I would bring it up each time, but three months went by, and he hadn't done anything about it. At this same time, there was a flap over the visas that were being requested by Guatemalan congressmen. They were being held up because the congressmen refused to fill out certain forms. Sue Patterson, our Consul General, felt

that while they were entitled almost automatically to visitor's visas to the United States on official visits, they were asking for official visas to do private business. She was trying to make a point, that congressmen should not expect special privileges from the United States Consul General—in direct contradiction to the way they operated in their country.

Q: Guatemalan congressmen?

STROOCK: Yes. Sue was holding up four or five visas. I went down to see the Interior Minister to ask that he cooperate with us in getting these Guatemalan congressmen to clear their paperwork so we could issue them visas. When I came out of his office after the interview, the press was waiting there for me. The American ambassador attracted press down there. On TV and radio and newspapers and everything else, they wanted to know why we were holding up these visas; denying these visas were the claims. I said that we weren't “denying” any visas. We were just requesting that everybody in Guatemala go through the same procedures. Congressmen were, in our view, no more entitled to special privileges than any other Guatemalan citizen, just as in our country. The press insisted, “Well you are denying visas,” and I said, “No, since I've gotten here, we've only denied two visas.” “And whose were those?” I said, “One of them is a mayor of a small town up in the Peten, who is known as an illegal alien smuggler, a 'coyote,' and we're not going to give him a visa. The other is Colonel Hugo Moran, who we believe to be involved in drug trafficking. As far as we're concerned Colonel Moran's activities have made him undesirable and we don't want him in our country.” Well, that certainly created a storm. It's the only time in our two year relationship that President Cerezo really got very personally angry at me. He thought I put him down personally. And I told him, “No Mr. President I didn't put you down personally, I just got tired of waiting for you to act.” (chuckles) I'm just picking out one incident out of maybe fifty, but there were fifty of them just like that.

Q: Maybe its time to move to the second “D,” democracy. That would have been heavily tied up in the upcoming election. . .

STROOCK: Yes. Well, at the time the big concern was that the Christian Democrats, who had controlled the congress—they had fifty-two out of the hundred deputies—and who also controlled the Presidency had a candidate by the name of Alfonso Cabrera. He had been the foreign minister and State Secretary Shultz hated him because he lied to him. He was reputed to be heavily involved in drug trafficking. There was no question that Cabrera's older brother was a drug trafficker. He went to jail. There's no question that a large amount of drug money supported Cabrera's political ambitions. He flew around the country in a helicopter owned by a drug king named Escobar. He had known ties to both Cali and Medellin cartels. But I must say that I was never convinced that Cabrera himself was involved in drug trafficking. It's just that if he had become president, he had so many chits out to those who were involved in drug trafficking that it would have been impossible to control. Furthermore, the army did not like Cabrera. We had all kinds of information that had he become elected, they would have moved against him and overthrown the government.

Q: Let me stop you for just a second. The president when you arrived was Vinicio Cerezo.

STROOCK: Yes.

Q: And how had he come to power?

STROOCK: He was legitimately and democratically elected in 1985. The story of the Cerezo election has been covered many times before and we shouldn't take the time to go into it here, but he had the opportunity to be the George Washington and Abraham Lincoln-rolled-into-one in his country. But he blew his chances and suffered two coups, in which he succeeded in escaping narrowly with his life and his government. The last two years of his administration, when I was there, he didn't care really whether school kept or not. He was there to enrich himself, which he did. He was personally corrupt. He took money, to our certain knowledge, from education funds, and from road funds.

Q: And he shipped the money off shore, didn't he?

STROOCK: I haven't any clear idea what he did with it, I just know that it disappeared. He bought himself a yacht called “Odiseus” for one thing.

Q: So you were talking about Cabrera and the...

STROOCK: Anyhow Cerezo was the president. He was an extraordinarily likeable guy. If he walked in the room right now, I would be glad to see him. As a human being he was despicable, but as a personality he was lots of fun. He was a guy you could always have a good time with. He liked jokes. He liked girls—he really did like girls! He liked to drink.

But he was corrupt, and in the last two years of his administration he didn't care whether school kept or not. When the economy started to inflate, he didn't even try to control things. In any event, Cabrera had been his buddy who helped him get elected, and so he in turn now was committed politically to help Cabrera get elected. Cabrera was the candidate of the Christian Democrat Party. There was a strong central group, the National Central Union, headed by a guy who I knew very well. He has since been killed very tragically; murdered by political opponents, but it was covered up to look like a robbery. His name was Jorge Carpio. His brother, Roberto, was Vinicio's Vice President. That gives you an idea of how involved all these families are in politics.

Carpio owned the newspaper, El Grafico, and he had been the candidate against Cerezo in 1985 and had lost. He had built up a pretty important party that controlled a number of seats in the congress. It was the second largest party in the country, and he was a very viable candidate.

Then there was the extreme right wing that had nominated an engineer who had become an economist, by the name of Manuel Ayau. He had been the rector of Franciso Maraquin University. He had dual citizenship, American citizenship and Guatemalan citizenship. He was running as the candidate of the MLN, the extreme right wing party. As the campaign

developed it became obvious that he was going no place, so he made a deal with the VCN. He came on board as Jorge Carpio's vice president. So Carpio and Ayau ran as one team and Cabrera was the major opposition. There were several smaller parties in the election that weren't given much of a chance, including the MAS, the Action Socialista, which, despite its name, was a conservative republican party, run by Jorge Serrano. He had been an associate of General Rios Montt.

Past histories will tell about the Rios Montt phenomenon. He seized power in 1983 and was forced out by the army 18 months later. In 1990, Rios Montt was running for the presidency on the FRG ticket. The constitution that the country operated on, and still operates on, was specifically designed to keep him from becoming president because of the events in 1983-84. But he claimed that he had the right to run for president. The truth of the matter is that there wasn't any question in my mind that had he been allowed to run, had the constitution not specifically prohibited him from running, he would have been overwhelmingly elected on the first ballot, in 1990, because it was known that he personally was not corrupt. He really shut down corruption in 1983 when he was president.

It was felt that the Cerezo regime was so corrupt, so lackadaisical, and the economy was inflating so fast, with no one paying attention to the store, that Rios Montt, despite all the evangelical Christian craziness that he had demonstrated in the two years that he had been the usurper president, still was the preferable candidate. The people believed that he would have brought order out of chaos. The Guatemalan people believe that to this day. He's got to be figured on when talking about the future of Guatemala. He is very definitely there, and very definitely interested, and still an active man; he's in his early sixties. A dynamic guy. Unfortunately for him, the Supreme Court ruled, shortly before the elections, that he couldn't run. The voters were looking around for someone who was as close to him as possible and they settled on Jorge Serrano. Jorge Serrano is a very interesting personality, one of the most interesting people I ever met; very difficult man. He was born-again Evangelical Christian, whose main problem was that he would not listen. He was an engineer. He wanted to handle everything himself. He believed that he was a prophet of

God and that he spoke directly to God. Phil Taylor, our DCM, very accurately said, “This guy's in transmit 99 percent of the time,” and he was. When I interviewed him you could see that he wasn't really listening to what I had to say. He was merely waiting til I got done so he could say what he had to say, and while I was talking he was thinking about what he was going to say. He wasn't taking anything in. He surrounded himself with yes-men, but he ran a very, very good political campaign in 1990. In September of that year he had perhaps two percent of the vote in the polls, and they were pretty accurate polls. Then the Court of Constiutionality ruled that Rios Montt could not run. From that day on the people drifted off the Rios Montt bandwagon and got on Jorge Sorrano's. He got some money, and he went on television with some very clever ads with attractive jingles. He said the right things. He did the right things. He hired Roger Ailes from the United States as a political expert to come down and advise him. From two percent in early September of 1990 he got to 24 percent in the elections held in November. Jorge Carpio got to 26 percent, and the other parties didn't reach double digits. One of the brighter stars in the firmament of Guatemalan politics is a young former mayor of Guatemala City by the name of Alvaro Artu. He had a party called the PAN, and they came in third. The Democrat Christians, because of their corruption, came in a poor fourth, and Cabrera was out of it.

Guatemalan law requires that you can't just win the presidency with plurality, you have to win with a majority. So there was a run off between Serrano and Jorge Carpio. Carpio having had 26 percent of the vote, Serrano 24 percent of the vote. And the thought was that they might split that difference; no one really knew what was going to happen. But again, Serrano campaigned very well, and Jorge Carpio campaigned very badly. He proceeded to attack Alvaro Artu, saying that Artu had made a corrupt deal with Serrano to support him as Foreign Minister if Serrano won. It was true, but saying it publicly and nastily, somehow he didn't do that right. There's a right way and a wrong way, and he picked the wrong way. Carpio hardly improved his vote at all. He went from 26 to 28 percent of the total vote. He only picked up two percentage points. All the rest of them, unanimously, went for Serrano who was elected by a large plurality.

Q: So it was 72 percent?

STROOCK: Approximately. Then subsequently Alvaro Artu became the Foreign Minister in the new Serrano cabinet. So Jorge Carpio wasn't wrong in his accusations. Nevertheless, the whole campaign, which was beginning to heat up by the time I got there in October in 1989, got very warm all year long. The threat and counter-threat of “there's going to be a coup, the army's going to take over and not have elections, Cerezo is going to resign and turn things over to Cabrera, Rios Montt is going to mount a coup, the army is going to support Rios Montt”—I mean, pick your daily rumor, and it would sweep the capital city. Since most politics in small Central American countries are controlled in the capital, what happens in a small group in the capital is much more important than what happens inside the beltway in Washington. In Washington inside the beltway, you can influence each other, but the huge mass of the country isn't that effected. In Guatemala, what happens inside their proverbial beltway does indeed affect how the country goes. The country is primitive enough, and the society is fractured enough, with half the population being Indian and not really in the political culture. What happens in the capital has tremendous influence.

Q: What was the turn out like in terms of registered voters?

STROOCK: It was about 65 percent in both cases.

Q: Do you know what percentage of person who would be eligible to vote, had they registered, were registered?

STROOCK: No. One of the problems in a Latin American country, particularly in one like Guatemala, which is so poor, is that they haven't had a reliable census ever. You are really guessing at how many people. I think there are more than ten million people living in that country, but I still see figures that say eight and a half to nine million. I think they're guessing at the population of Guatemala City. I believe it to be an excess of two million,

but they're not quite officially showing it to be two million yet, so it's very difficult to tell. Of course the country has a huge rate of illiteracy, so people vote with their thumbprints when they can't spell. The Democrat Christians, have a well organized organization in the countryside, and they literally truck the Guatemalan Indians into town and march them up to the polls where they put their thumbprint where they are told. Nevertheless, the election was legal. It was clean. It was open. We had a lot of investigators, international and American observers, down there during the election, and all agreed on this.

Q: Who was the head of the observer team, do you recall?

STROOCK: Well, there were many different ones. The UN had one. We had one. President Carter was down there. So it was hard to say, but there were several of them. I guess the UN would have been the principle one. It was headed by a man by the name of Tomuchat. But I went around all the country on both election days, up and down the countryside, and I'm convinced that they were open, clean elections; that there was no fraud, either time.

Q: Do you think voters were coerced?

STROOCK: Well, I think that it was a cleaner election in that regard than you have for Sweetwater County Sheriff in Wyoming. It's the same kind of coercion as “Bring your friends into town on the truck and you all vote.” In any event we did have a clean election, and I flatter myself that much of what we did in the embassy; the constant talking and prodding and visiting the army and saying, “you can't do that,” the visiting with the various political figures and saying, “You have got to do this right.” I saw Rios Montt twice. I became a very good friend of his vice presidential candidate, a man by the name of Harris Whitbick who again had dual U.S.-Guatemalan citizenship Several of the major figures in Guatemala society have dual citizenship. Harris had been in the United States Marine Corps, liked to play tennis and was a good friend. I would say, “Harris, as a leader in this culture there are things you really must do. You will lose more than you will gain unless

you run a clean election." I really spent about a quarter of my time from October of 1989-January of 1991 trying to promote a legitimate election.

Although we were accused of it, definitely we had no preferred candidate. That was the other thing: we were accused because I got early on to be a personal friend of Jorge Carpio. I thought he was a very educated, erudite, interesting man.

Marta and I got to be social friends of Jorge and his wife Marita. They would invite us to their home in Antigua, and we would have them over for small dinners—as personal friends—at the embassy. And because of that, it was assumed that, certainly Serrano assumed, that I was supporting Carpio. But we never did, and never could. We refused to take sides publicly or privately. I would tell Jorge privately, "Jorge, you're my good friend and I hope you always are my good friend, but you're gonna be my good friend whether you stay as editor of El Grafico or whether you're president of your country. That's the way it's gonna be." Also, I got to be very, very impressed with Alvaro Artu, and I made a point of meeting personally with all the candidates at any time that I could, refusing to have my picture taken with them publicly (which they all wanted), because I didn't want the United States to get involved in the decision of the election. But we were very heavily involved in the mechanics of the election.

One of the things we did was support the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which was run by a wonderful man by the name of Arturo Herbrugger who is today the Vice President of Guatemala. He's 81 years old. He's a distinguished jurist. He's one of the leading jurists in Central America, and he's one of the few uncorrupt members of the Latin American judiciary I've ever met. A wonderful man of whom I'm very fond. He ran the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and we said, "Look, what do you need to run an honest election in terms of computer capability, in terms of FAX machines, in terms of communication, because if we can use computers, where communication is instantaneous, it will tremendously cut down the ability to manipulate the election." We must have spent well over 300,000 dollars of our AID funds with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, on this

program. It was one of the few programs where I would not insist on having matching funds because the Supreme Electoral Tribunal had no funds to match. As we get into development I'll talk about the matching funds concept. But this was just an outright grant of US AID money to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to equip them, to have safe and secure transmission of results, instantaneous communication, and safe and secure computation results. Because of that the election was very well run in a country where elections had not been very well run previously. The AID mission that coordinated this was run first by Tony Cauterucci and then by Terry Brown. They both did an excellent job. I really think that was one place where the American taxpayer got a very good run for his less than half a million bucks.

Q: Was democracy still a major issue after Serrano took office or was that really the end?

STROOCK: No, no, no. It's always going to be a major issue. In fact Serrano fell off the wagon after I left. I left in November of 1992, and in May of 1993, Jorge Serrano tried to turn himself into a dictator. He tried to abolish the courts, abolish the congress, and muffle press. He tried that twice before during my stay there. He would convince himself that anyone who opposed his programs was in the pay of a drug lord, was a narco-trafficker, trying to destabilize his government and had bought off and bribed the TV and newspapers. He was a great believer in the conspiracy theory and believed that just about everything was a conspiracy against him. The newspapers would attack him in cartoons, or when they would publish that his family had taken up buying polo ponies and playing polo, or that he had purchased a (finca) and was trying to throw some poor Indians off the (finca) land in Rio Dulce. All of this was true, but he took these as personal assaults and personal attacks on him—the equivalent of lese majeste—trying to destabilize his state.

I sent our defense attach# to see the Army Chief of Staff, Tromciso Orvega, who was his good friend, to say that this can never work. I went down to the police myself to say, “If you proceed to continue to terrorize the newspaper editors [which he was doing], and if you abolish the congress— “If you do that,” I said, “you will make my life a lot easier. I will

become the world's greatest senior tennis player because there will be nothing for me to do except to go out on that tennis court I've got in back of the embassy and practice so that when I go back to Wyoming I'll be the senior's tennis champ. I can promise you that every single program and every single communication between you and the government of United States will be cut." I think, truly, that this was one of the key factors in delaying in his decision until after I left. A few times he really listened to me because I really got in his face. But not very often.

Q: So you think you talked him out of turning himself into a dictator?

STROOCK: I don't know that I myself was responsible. There were several other factors. The time wasn't right for other reasons, too. I think one of the reasons that he did make the attempt in May 1993 was that there was no American ambassador there. We had an extremely able deputy chief of mission. The DCM was John Keene, who couldn't be a more able man, a better officer, who some day surely will be an ambassador. He got an award for his handling of affairs during those difficult days, but he couldn't go down and pound on the table the way a Chief of Mission could. I used to pound it literally, pound my hand on the side of the chair of the visitation office of Serrano. He didn't like it: he really didn't like me. In private, he called me "Cowboy that Ambassador." I did not have the same nice, warm personal relationship with Serrano that I had with Cerezo. Serrano was a tougher character. I think Serrano started out wanting to do the right things, and we had great hopes for him the first six months. But he interpreted everything that was in the least bit critical as being destabilizing, and we were constantly being critical. Constructively critical, but—still—critical. And he didn't have the ability to laugh. I mean when Cerezo and I got done beating up on each other, we'd go play tennis. When Serrano and I got done talking, he would stomp off with the steam coming from around his collar. It was a totally different personality mix.

As I say, Serrano was an extremely complex character. There was so much that was good about him, and there was so much that was bad about him. The corruption was bad, but

his abilities to engineer and organize were good. Cerezo was controlled by the army. The Defense Minister—Alejandro Gramajo—would come over to the palace and was able to move Cerezo around. The army never dared tell Serrano what to do. In fact, he told the army. He grabbed a hold of it, was its Commander in Chief and the infractions they committed while he was President, he knew about. He either approved of them or at least didn't object to them. Two totally different sets of personalities.

There was constant worry on our part about this guy who is an autocrat. He literally would tell me, “I spoke to the Lord,” and I had an answer for that, but I never used it, I was always prepared to say, “Well, you know I speak to the Lord, too, and He tells me something different than what he tells you,” but I wasn't sure that would do it. Instead, I said, “Well, I spoke to Bernie Aronson, and he isn't quite the Lord, but...” I tried that on him once. It's difficult to make him laugh, but he did on that one.

Q: Should we move on to Development now?

STROOCK: I suppose we'd better. You need to know, and those who deal with the history of this period need to know, that democracy is only skin-deep in Guatemala. It's not a real democracy, it's just a facade. It's a Potemkin village. They have the president, the courts, and congress, but the corruption, and the lack of support, and the fact that there is no social contract down there means that our concern about real democracy was truly justified, and our continuing concern to make sure that it take some kind of root is really justified. This was—and will continue to be—a big problem for our bilateral relationship.

Q: Let's do move on to Development. Why don't you tell us what the issue was in your mind? What it was you thought you could do?

STROOCK: Well, there were two ways to handle it. We had two programs. One was the AID programs to try and help them get on their feet with our U.S. taxpayer resources. The other was the trade program, the private effort, which was much more effective, but much more difficult to handle. When I got down there, the AID program the previous

year, had spent almost 200 million dollars. The biggest problem was that the Guatemalan government had not been taking in any money from taxes. They were printing money and the inflation had grown to more than 20% annually.. The quetzal, which was their unit of monetary exchange, had been stable at one quetzal to the dollar exchange. When I got there it was 2.8 quetzals to the dollar, and it was heading north to three, of four, and then five quetzals to the dollar. Inflation of 26, 27, almost 30 percent. A very corrupt young man, Oscar Pineda, had become the Minister of Finance. The extremely able president of the national bank, Frederico Linavas, had resigned, and the new finance team had no grasp of what they were doing. They were in a arrears to the World Bank, the price of coffee was falling, coffee being their principal export, so the economy was in desperate shape. Because of cheating and corruption, much of our AID money had been misused. The year before I got there, we had given them so-called “Economic Support Funds, EST, which are direct injections of U.S. taxpayer dollars, into the Bank of Guatemala in the amount of 80 million dollars. The quid pro quo for the 80 million dollars was that instead of trying to control the currency, they would remove all currency controls, which they did. So the 80 million dollars did accomplish convertibility and opened up the economy, which was necessary. But instead of solving the country's economic problems for two or three years, it didn't even solve them for two or three months. The 80 million dollars were disbursed in August of '89. I got there in October of '89 and it was almost as if, except for the convertibility factor, this money had never been seen. So we immediately started to try and change the way the economy was handled. We had a brilliant economist from Georgia State University with AID mission by the name of Sam Skogsted. The Economic Section of the embassy, which later on became extremely strong under the very able leadership of one of the best economists, male or female, I ever met, Geri Chester, wasn't all that strong before her arrival. It was the weakest of the agencies that we had down there. So I depended on Skogsted and his economic team from AID to help with the private sector.

We were trying to get the government to privatize many of the agencies which were so fat and bloated. They refused to privatize the telephone monopoly, (Guatel), because it

made so much money for the government. They had already privatized the national airline, Aviatecu, the year before I got there, but they'd done it in an extremely dirty and crooked way. Interestingly enough the president and the lady who was his personal secretary, and who quite frankly lived with him, Claudia Arenas, were the largest stockholders. They also were on the board of directors. It was that kind of an operation.

We tried to set out an economic program that they could follow. We insisted that we wouldn't put up any more Economic Support Funds unless they did follow that economic program. AID had 50 million dollars of economic support funds allocated for Guatemala, in January or February of 1990. We didn't actually disburse any of it, because we were negotiating the treaty under which it would be spent, until September of 1990 in the middle of the presidential political campaign. Then we only released 20 million dollars of it, directly into Guatemala's account at the World Bank. Further, we made it a requirement that they would take certain actions set out in a Memorandum of Understanding that we negotiated in order to get the balance of 30 million dollars. They never took those steps so we kept the 30 million dollars they didn't earn and held it over for dealing with the next administration.

We were trying to get them to do what was necessary to curb inflation, to stop printing money, to privatize their government agencies, and to open up the economy so that at least the “trickle down theory” of economics that they believed in would work. The problem in Guatemala is that when they do run their economy and run it right, they don't allow the workers to get any of it. Their minimum wages are not enforced. The private sector says they're going to pay minimum wage, but they rarely do. The social security system doesn't work. The public health system doesn't work. I paint a very black picture because the picture is black. The economy is good for maybe 10 percent of the Guatemalan population. It's excellent for one percent. It's okay for maybe another ten percent, and then 79 to 80 percent of the people live in constant and abject misery. The benefits of an open economy aren't getting down to them because the economy isn't open below a certain social and economic status. We were constantly working on that. I think, along with the guerrilla war,

this is the long most important range problem of Guatemala. The people who control the economy will not allow even the “trickle down” theory to work. There is no social justice in Guatemala today—that is the sad truth.

Q: One of your major initiatives had to do with the matching funds, didn't it?

STROOCK: Well this was in the area of AID, and that's another problem altogether. The part I'm talking about is the private economy...

Q: So I've change the subject prematurely then?

STROOCK: No, it's all right. Let's talk about it. The other component in developing a country is to try and develop the social system and, most importantly the educational system. We tried to promote contacts, scholarship programs that bring Guatemalan students to the United States, and Americans to Guatemala, Fulbright scholars and that kind of thing. The Peace Corps is great. We need to talk about the Peace Corps as a separate matter altogether. Remind me to talk about the Peace Corps because I think it's very important.

When I got down there, we had a program of a hundred and twenty million dollars in what they call DA, Direct Aid, for specific programs: bilingual education, immunization of children, nourishment of mothers, women's health care and road construction for farm to market roads. What I found we were doing, to my utter horror, was: when the program was approved in Washington, we would hire a contractor, and put up the money in advance, letting the contractor draw against it. Well you can imagine how much went into roads and how much went into education and how much went into health care and how much went into somebody's pocket. I found that in a sixteen million dollar program in health care, over a million dollars was unaccounted for. The AID inspector general just couldn't account for it. This was probably the most difficult decision for me as Ambassador. The sixteen million dollar program was one for immunization of children and in that society, children not immunized against the simplest germs, such as measles, mumps, chicken

pox, anything. The disease just takes them off because they're not properly nourished. I had to decide whether or not I was going to shut that 16 million program down because the Guatemalan health department had stolen a million dollars of it. I got advice that I would be responsible for the deaths of many, many children. I decided that yes, I would, but unless somebody made a stand some place they'd likely run out and at least half of what was left of the sixteen million bucks. So I shut the program down. I had to fight the bureaucracy up and down to do it. It was amazing, when the government there saw that we weren't kidding—it took about 90 days to convince them that there was going to be no more money and that program was going down the tubes—the corrupt Minister of Health (and he really was corrupt), named Doctor Gellart Matas, began a real rain dance. He was a friend of the Ambassador of the Order Knights of Malta. Gellart Matas had the Ambassador set up a dinner to which I came, and there he made this plea to me. The Ambassador of the Knights of Malta, who was really my friend, said, “Pancho, I appreciate this dinner and I appreciate Dr. Matas being here, but the fact of the matter is that American taxpayer money was stolen and until it's replaced, the American taxpayer has no business supporting this program. If a lot of children die, it's not the fault of the American taxpayer, it's the fault of the people who stole their money. I think both you and the Minister had better understand that.” And he backed off a mile, and Gellart Matas was finally convinced we were serious. We finally got three people thrown in jail. We got half the money back, finally, and we reinstated the program a year later.

Q: Just for the record, what was the name of the ambassador of the Knights of Malta?

STROOCK: Pancho Balzaretti, Francisco Balzaretti. He's still there. He's a wonderful friend and a good guy.

Q: So you got three people put in jail...

STROOCK: We got three people put away and got half the money back, we reinstated the program. But in the course of doing all of this, I called on some of my very firm memories

of days in the Wyoming State Senate. I remembered how federal funds were being sent to Wyoming to be spent on road programs. The federal highways, the big four-lane highways, are built on a program that is 10 percent state money and 90 percent federal money. The state Highway Department hardly gives a damn about those highways. They send out an inspector occasionally to look at it, but it's the Federal Bureau of Roads that builds them and worries about them and essentially maintains them. The State Highway Department looks after them, but most of the money comes from the feds, so it is not their main focus.

The main focus is on any program where the State Highway Department spends all its money or at least pays 50 percent of the cost. I'm thinking of market roads, industrial development roads, and roads like that, where the state has to come up with at least 50 percent of the money. And there the state engineers are out there examining that the money is being properly spent, because now they've got real “skin” in the deal.

Human nature is the same world-wide, and if the Guatemalans had 50 percent of their own dough in the deal, then they're going to pay attention. I think this served as a screen as well. A lot of programs we had promoted in the past in Guatemala were our own great ideas, but they weren't what the Guatemalans really thought was so great. As long as we were going to give it to them, why not take it? But by the time I left, we had quit advancing money. We had only put up our AID money after the Guatemalans had put theirs up. And we did it on a 50 percent matching basis in every single program. The few exceptions were the specific ones already mentioned, and another one which funded the Human Rights Ombudsman's office so that it had agencies in all 23 provinces. Also, the Peace Corps volunteers—we put up a fund of 250 Thousand Dollars. The volunteers could come in and—up to a maximum of 5 thousand dollars—get a program going. But even those were matched because while the five thousand dollars bought the materials for the school house, it was the villagers who built the school. While the five thousand dollars bought the plastic pipe for the potable water system, it was the villagers who dug the ditches and put the pipe together and dug the well.

Q: So they matched with their labor your funds.

STROOCK: Yes, but I'm talking about actual fund matching because that was another argument we had. The Guatemalans said, “Well, we'll match it with rent space and with effort.” I said, “No, that's been done in the past, and it doesn't work, it's not the same. Its got to be dollars.” And I think whoever runs this program that we're talking about, will want to talk to Terry Brown our AID Mission Director and get his vision on it because Terry is the one who really carried it to fruition.

Q: Do you think it worked?

STROOCK: I know it worked. I know it worked. It made our aid much more efficient. You could see the efficiency growing in front of your eyes, you could see many more miles of road for our dollar, you could see the roads were better maintained, you could see that the schools were better built, you could see that the schools which we had built with a hundred percent of our dough, weren't properly cared for. They were falling down and dirty and messy and looked generally neglected. Once those local people had half their dough in it, man, they looked spick and span and were great.

Q: Was there less corruption? Less money...?

STROOCK: I hope so. I don't know. Once you turn the money over to the people, you're at their mercy. WE certainly scared a lot of people with our actions on the health thing. I mean that reverberated around the country. I'd like to think so. I can tell you that I saw the change that we got more bang for our buck, but I didn't see whether or not we had curbed the corruption.

Q: You said before that there was something you wanted to mention about the Peace Corps. Was it about that 250 thousand dollar fund or...

STROOCK: Well, that's the part that leads me into the Peace Corps. I think the best thing that we do in terms of our people to people relationship, in terms of being good neighbors, is the Peace Corps. Certainly in Guatemala. The Peace Corps got out to small teeny rural villages that would never see an American. Guatemalans were used to seeing Americans who are diplomats and visit in big cars or helicopters, or ministers or preachers, who evangelize a certain belief. They see either diplomats or religious types or rich tourists who dress funny and travel in big tourist buses. But they don't see the real people of the United States who make up the head and heart of our country. The Peace Corps volunteers live in the villages just the way the villagers do and get to know them and have a little bit of money to promote a local project and make people's lives a little bit better. When the Peace Corps guy or gal leaves the villagers may forget the particular lesson of how to plant trees, or they may not plant anymore trees. They may not remember all the health instructions that the nurse gave, or the water system may break and they may not remember how to fix it. But as long as they live they'll remember that a young (or in some cases old), American came and lived with them and shared their lives, and did it for no other reason than to make the lives of those villagers better. And you're never going to get anti- Americanism in a generation who has been exposed to these kinds of Americans. That's the best thing we do overseas.

Q: Management of what?

STROOCK: Of the embassy, which was over-staffed. We reduced the staff of the embassy substantially. And I think that there are many more places in that embassy and many other embassies where the staff can be reduced in size. I don't think that we have in the past used proper business management in running embassies, but one place that we should not cut, one place where we get much more than we give is in the Peace Corps program.

Q: Had we pretty well covered, given the scope of this short conversation this morning, have we pretty well covered developments?

STROOCK: I would think so.

Q: Okay. Should we move on to human rights? which begins with a “d” in Spanish?

STROOCK: Yes, it does. Before I got there there had been the murder of twelve university students which had happened in August of 1989. There's a pretty well accepted statistic that well over 120,000 people have been murdered by both sides in the 32 year long guerrilla war. I am personally convinced that about 25 percent of those murders and atrocities were committed by the guerrillas and their supporters, and about 75 percent of those murders and atrocities were committed by the army and their supporters. There's an organization called the “Patrulleros Civiles,” which the army has set up in each village. They are taking a lesson out of Mao Zedong's book; that he who controls the sea controls the fishing. The Patrulleros have been set up to make sure that guerrilla groups don't move in and out of these small villages. They have ended up in too many instances, tyrannizing and terrorizing these villages. By now they pretty much control them.

The army is the most important figure in the rural areas of the country—95 percent of it—for a very simple reason. If you are the mayor of a little village up in the boondocks, or down in the jungle, and you want a road, or you want a well, or you want potable water, or you want a community building built, you can write and petition and budget and go down to the capital, which is where everything has to be done. The government operates on an extremely centralized system—you can't even get an automobile license outside of one building in the capital. Well, as mayor, you can write and do all, but you'll never get what you need, because the money isn't there, and the ability isn't there. But if you go down the road to the local army barracks, and talk to the captain, or the lieutenant in charge, he'll send a group of troops out and they'll dig the well, or they'll build the school, or they'll build the road. That's where the army gets its strength and support. They are the only effective force of any kind, for good or evil, that represents government out in the country. And, of

course, they take advantage of it. They steal and rob and commit atrocities, and anybody who speaks out against them is going to disappear.

There is no social contract as we understand it out in the back country. Furthermore, half the population of Guatemala is “indigena”—direct descents of the Mayan Indians the conquistadores encountered. They speak 23 separate different and distinct languages. Not dialects, distinct languages. So one tribe doesn't understand the other. They're separated by their language, they're not united. Perhaps half of them know how to speak Spanish, which is the official language of the country. So at least 25 percent of the population doesn't speak Spanish at all, just their native languages. They're people who don't read. They vote with their thumb; they sign contracts with their thumb print.

The land distribution system of the country is totally skewed. There are families trying to make a living on a plot of land no bigger than this conference table. As each family has more children the land will get divided further. There's no primogeniture in Guatemala. When someone dies, and he has a plot of land as big as this room, it gets divided up five ways if there are five living children, and there generally are at least that many. That's another problem that we haven't time to touch on in this conversation, but population control is absolutely essential to the future of Latin American countries, and of Guatemala in particular. If the economy grows at 3 percent annually, that would be marvelous. But the population grows at more than 3 percent, so you're working like hell to fall further and further behind on a per basis. The misery index just keeps going up

Q: What did you as the Ambassador try to do about this human rights?

STROOCK: When I first got to the Department, and read the cables, it became obvious to me that State was apologizing for the human rights atrocities that had been committed for years. We were so concerned that the Soviet Union would extend its influence in Latin America that we accepted the atrocities committed by the rich oligarchs who controlled the economy, and the army who controlled the rural countryside, and the corrupt governments

who controlled the city streets. We accepted corruption and atrocities as the price we had to pay to make sure that the country didn't fall into the hands of the Soviet Union, or that the Soviet Union wasn't able to make a Cuban-type base for ballistic missiles aimed at us. It was a legitimate concern, and one which drove our policy in Latin America for years, including the first two months that I got to Guatemala.

But there was a sea change in November and December of 1989: an amalgam of Gorbachev, perestroika, glasnost, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the fracturing of Eastern Europe. We saw the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Now there was no reason to tolerate human rights violations by anybody, but certainly not by the army. There was no longer any communist threat for them to protect us against. If there ever had been a communist threat, there certainly wasn't one now. That whole perception that existed in Washington for so many years that we had to worry about leftist infiltration and takeover in Latin America diminished considerably. It wasn't gone by the time I left, and I dare say it isn't gone as we sit here and talk today. And yet, the reality is that, in fact, it is gone, and American policy in Latin America and Central America has to realize that it's gone. There is no excuse anymore for us to tolerate the human rights violations we thought we had to tolerate in the past, particularly in view of our own heritage of freedom and independence.

I went down there with the belief that we had been much too accepting of human rights violations in the past, that it was not in our national character, heritage or interest to continue to accept it. And yet, I couldn't be a do-gooder and ignore the fact that one had to work with what you had there, the agencies that were functioning. The fact that the economy was controlled by the few wealthy, you had to work with that. You couldn't destroy the economy because you didn't like that. Despite the fact that the army had contributed to 75 percent of the atrocities, you had to work with the army. You had to try and persuade all these people that things had to change.

So I tried with the Cerezo administration, particularly after the fall of the Berlin wall which was a dramatic event that was really noticed all over Latin America. Perestroika and the

glasnost hadn't affected them as much, but the dramatic visuals that were carried all over the world by TV On the fall of the wall made a big impression. That's a new factor in our policy now; instant television communication and the fact that CNN is available in every little village in the world. I kept asking; let's find the people who murdered the students (it was undoubtedly the army), and make an example of them. Doing justice would raise the army's estimation in the rest of the world, I said. I tried that on Gramajo, the Defense Minister I don't know how many times. Senator Dodd and Senator Warner came down and spent the night, and we took Gramajo out to dinner. They each individually took it up with him, to no avail.

A month after I got there we had the case of a young nun, Sister Diana Ortiz. Something terrible had happened to her. When I finally saw her after she had been kidnaped for 48 hours, she had been seriously beaten. But her story just didn't hang together. What she said happened to her, just couldn't have happened to her. Nevertheless, something had happened to her, and we were trying to get the Guatemalan officials to cooperate with us. They refused.

It was frustrating as hell because I knew that the fact that an American nun was kidnaped, beaten and possibly, but not probably, raped and tortured was bound to appeal, and did in fact appeal to American television, American newspapers, and upset the Catholic church.

Many, many Catholic bishops and priests accepted her story at face value. Who wouldn't, if you didn't know that what she said happened to her, couldn't have happened to her. But something bad did happen to her, and today we still don't know what that was. As I sit here talking to you, I don't know what it was that actually happened. I just know that for whatever reasons, she lied to us, tried to implicate the embassy in the affair and refused to cooperate with our efforts in any way. That story hit the headlines and we were getting stonewalled by the Guatemalans. Every day you'd pick up the papers, read about another murder. There were street children being tortured. A street child was kicked to death. There are about 5,000—probably 10,000 now—children who live on the street every night

in Guatemala City, abandoned by their families. Of course, they're not little boy scouts and girl scouts. They're 10 year old prostitutes, and 9 year old thieves—and that kind of thing. But you don't murder and torture them. There were pictures of three street boys who had been tortured. I'm convinced security forces, maybe not army, maybe the police, did it. Their tongues were cut out, their noses were cut off, their fingers were burned. I mean torturing children; it was truly terrible. Something I didn't think people of the United States could possibly condone. We tried to get the police to come forward as to what happened, and to investigate. Unfortunately, the courts were hand in glove with the police on this, so nothing happened. I got there in October. By February of 1990, I had my belly full. I'd spoken to the president, we had monthly breakfasts, so we'd had four monthly breakfasts in which we'd discussed all of these things. I'd made at least two special trips down to see the Ministry of the Interior. I don't know how many times I've gone by the Defense Ministry with the Defense Attach#, Colonel Cornell, to discuss them. We were getting nowhere. They knew that the American Ambassador was going to leave in three or four years. Their plan was to stiff him and pat him on the head. In time he would go away, and things would continue in their natural course.

I was scheduled to make a speech to the Rotary Club, which is the biggest gathering with businessmen in the country. I got ahold of the Public Affairs Officer, John Tracy; a marvelous Irishman, a great friend of mine and an excellent PAO. I said, “I want to make a speech. I want to make it as friendly as possible under the circumstances, but as firm as a rock about human rights.” That's what it was. There was a phrase in there that said, “The United States cannot long have productive relations with a country that either promotes, or tolerates, human rights abuses of its own citizens because that is not in the tradition of the American people.” Well, that created quite a sensation. The press asked Vinicio Cerezo, the President, about it, and he said, “Well, I know Tom. He's kind of a cowboy, and these are just his personal opinions, I'm sure they don't reflect the opinions of the United States government.”

So, for the first time, I really pulled in whatever chips I had. I called Bernie Aronson in the State Department, and I said, “You guys have got to support me.” I give Bernie a great deal of credit for a lot of things; but certainly on this one. He backed me up 100 percent.

He was mad at me, “Damn it, why didn't you send up the speech for me to read before you gave it?” “Bernie, I did.” What we'd done, John and I, was to write the speech in Spanish. We'd sent it up in Spanish because it was going to be given in Spanish. What neither of us knew, and I didn't realize until quite a bit later, was that Bernie didn't speak Spanish. He saw it but he didn't read it, or have it translated. Because it was in Spanish he just skipped it. From then on out, of course, I cabled everything I was going to say in English as well as Spanish.

Regardless of the fact that he was upset about that, Bernie backed me up 100 percent. He said, “What we'll do is we'll bring you home. We'll recall you as a sign of our displeasure with the president's statement.”

When I got back to Washington, I thought to myself; just being recalled and coming back, that's not dramatic enough. I need something dramatic. I need a letter signed by the President of the United States saying that Ambassador Stroock does indeed speak for this administration. To get a letter signed by the President through the fudge factory down at Foggy Bottom, is not going to happen in a week. I wanted to get back to Guatemala in a week while this thing was still hot.

Joe Sullivan, who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central America was in favor of doing it. Bernie Aronson was in favor of doing it. You have to understand that Guatemala was not large on their radar screen—they had a few other problems. It was essentially turned over to me. “If you can get a letter, hurray.”

The first thing I did was get ahold of Margaret Tutwiler who had worked on the Bush campaign as Jim Baker's secretary. She was now the Assistant Secretary for Public

Affairs. I got an appointment with her and asked Margaret to get me an appointment with Jim Baker so I could get my letter. Then I worked with the Guatemala desk officer, a brilliant girl by the name of Debbie McCarthy. She ran around the Legal Department and I got input from anybody she could. We worked up a one-page letter in Spanish—with a good English translation this time—for the President to sign. It said that indeed I did speak for the administration, and while the President had every kind of admiration and respect for President Cerezo, he really wanted him to know that human rights were an important component of our relations. I have a copy of the letter. I forget all the details but it was a good friendly, fair, but very firm letter.

I was trying to get up to see Jim, and Bernie said, “You'll never get to see Jim on this. He's flying around...” He had the Middle East, and Poland. I said, “Let me try.” So I got ahold of Margaret, and we got ahold of Karen Davidson, Jim's scheduling secretary and the next thing you know Baker said, “Yes, I'd like to talk to Stroock. I want to talk to him about my ranch in Wyoming.” Jim looked at and almost bought the Moose Willow, our place in Dubois, and he did buy a place 50-60 miles away. “I want to talk to him.” So I had an appointment at 11:00 on the Thursday.

In the meantime I had also contacted Chase Untermeyer, and Nancy Wong on the staff in the White House. I wasn't getting anywhere to get in to see the President. Suddenly I remembered that General Brent Scowcroft, who was the head of the National Security Council was a good friend of Dick Cheney's. I had met him through Dick and we had gotten along well at subsequent meetings. So I called Kathy Enbody, Dick's secretary—she has been his secretary for years—and got her to call Brent Scowcroft's secretary. Then I called Brent and said, “I really, really need to talk to you.” So I had an appointment on Thursday with Baker, and Friday with Scowcroft. The deal with Scowcroft was that he would take me to see the President with this now famous letter. Saturday I would spend with my sister Sandra and then Sunday I was going to fly back to Guatemala.

Nobody in the State Department really thought that all this would hang together, but I did persuade the ARA staff to help. Thursday morning Bernie Aronson said, “If you're going to see Baker, I'd like to go with you.” I said, “Of course.” We showed up in Baker's office at 11:00, and were marched right in. Jim wanted to spend the whole time talking about his ranch near Boulder in Wyoming. He'd shot an elk 400 feet away at his neighbor's ranch, at the Skinners. Of course I love to talk about Wyoming too, and we exchanged fishing lies. Finally, we could tell it was getting to the end of the time and he said, “Oh, about this Guatemala thing, you've got a letter you want signed by the President?” I said, “Yes, Mr. Secretary, I sure do,” and I explained to him why. He turned to Bernie and said, “Bernie, what do you think?” Well, by this time Bernie has realized that Jim and I go back a little ways. To be fair and to be truthful he was not as gung-ho as I was. He would have sent me back to Guatemala with or without the letter. But he said, “Yes, I've read it, it seems it's okay.” “Okay, then let's do it,” replied Baker. And I said, “Mr. Secretary, I have an appointment over at the White House to expedite this.” And he said, “I'd rather you go through channels, but the letter is okay.”

When we went out in the hall, I said to Bernie, “If we go through channels, I'm never going to get this letter signed in time. I'm going to take this letter over to Brent Scowcroft with me. Would you authorize it to be typed?” And he did, bless his heart. So I had the letter typed in final form, the official letter in English, and also the official translation in Spanish. Friday I waltzed it over to the White House at about 10:30 in the morning. I waited for about 50 minutes, and finally got in to see Brent Scowcroft, and of course, no chit-chat there, just me and Brent Scowcroft.

I told him my problem, and he read the letter and he said, “Bernie Aronson has signed off on it?” I said, “Yes,” and I had the whole file, and I said, “I've talked to Jim Baker about it too.” “Okay.” He said, “You better hurry.” So he picked up the phone, and spoke to the President. Immediately, he walked me from his office down two corridors into the Oval Office. You can hear that there is a chopper warming up on the White House south lawn.

That's how close it was. The President was headed off at noon for some place—I think Camp David, I'm not sure. We spent two or three minutes chatting—how are you? how is Marta? and how are things going?

He was very flattering, “You're doing a wonderful job, and I hear there's a problem? You've got a letter for me to sign?” And I said, “Yes, Mr. President, here it is.”

He said to Brent, “Is it okay if I sign this?” And Brent said, “Its been approved by everybody in the State Department.” He looked at me and said, “This better not be wrong,” and he put it up on the door jamb as he heads out the door, signed George Bush, and handed it to me. Then he went out with his entourage, got in the helicopter and lifts off. Very impressive: Marines saluting—everything. I breathed a sigh of relief.

That's how I got the letter. Then I took that letter back to Guatemala over the weekend and arranged an appointment that Monday with the President at his official office in the palace.

The people in the embassy were really impressed with that letter. Until then, they didn't know whether I was for real or not. We had our country team meeting that morning. A lady that ran one of the missions in AID—ROCAP. It was the regional AID mission that did regional things, mostly in the environment. This gal was a real friend. Her name was Nadine Hogan, and she's a great politician, a good friend of the Coors family who has been active in Denver politics, Colorado politics and national politics for years.

She has great political instincts, so I asked her, “How do you think I ought to handle this thing?”

She said, “You show that to everybody on your Country Team. They're all wondering whether you're for real.” So we called them all in, 19 or 20 people, and I showed the letter before I took it down to the palace to show the president.

I said, “I've got this letter and this is the way we're going to go. We've got Bernie Aronson and Jim Baker and the President behind us 100 percent.” That letter, I think, was the pivotal point that changed the whole direction of the way the embassy moved on Human Rights. It changed the way the Guatemalan government perceived us. It also changed how the rest of Guatemalan society perceived us. Because previous to that, talking about human rights violations wasn't quite the right thing to do. After all, it meant that everybody knew you were bad mouthing the security forces, and the army, and the government; because they did most of it. It was considered maybe a little too pro-communist, and a little too far to the left to do that.

But once the American Ambassador came back with a letter from the President after that speech, it was very obvious where the United States stood; and where the United States stands is where most of Guatemalan society wants to be. From then on out I really did begin to notice great change in the way the Guatemalans approached human rights violations publicly, privately, and governmentally. The army assaults on human rights, the official assaults on human rights declined—markedly. There were other factors contributing, of course. One was the fact that when Cerezo came to office, one of the good things he did was to open up a dialogue with the guerrillas. The guerilla war is responsible for an awful lot of these human rights violations. When you put a claymore mine in a road, and someone walks on it, no matter whether the guerrilla placed the claymore mine or the army did, whose ever leg gets blown off, that's a human rights violation. That sort of thing diminished as the guerrillas and the army would talk to each other. The people began to believe that there could be a peaceful end to this guerrilla war. It hasn't happened yet—but they still have that belief. There wasn't the intensity of trying to mutilate each other in the guerrilla war. It got better—but it wasn't good.

There were still violations. The guerrillas still came in and burned up hospitals and kidnaped and threatened death to American missionaries. Perhaps the most famous case that involved an American, was the Michael Devine case in June of 1990. An American

named Michael Devine, who had been a Peace Corps volunteer, and who lived up in the little town of Popgun, had a restaurant, a camp ground, and a small ranch. He was accosted by five non-commissioned officers, directed by at least a captain and probably a colonel in the Guatemalan army, and accused of stealing, or trafficking in a Calil rifle that had been missing from the local army base. He hadn't been. He had a Galil rifle all right, but he had purchased it quite legally. He hadn't stolen it from the army base, and the army knew better than that.

But in the course of interrogating him, they killed him. The details as to whether or not he got mad and they killed him, or whether they beat him up and then killed him we aren't sure, but we had enough circumstantial evidence and eye witnesses to know that these guys forced him out of his pickup truck, and put him in their pickup truck. They took him into the Poptum army base, and later his decapitated body was found beside the road at the gate of his ranch. We know who did it. We know the vehicle it was done in.

So I went to the then new Defense Minister, a wishy-washy, sneaky type named General Bolanos, and tried to convince him if they would just bring the people who did this to justice, that they would reflect on themselves. It could turn it into something positive. Instead of causing great American distress, it would cause great American support. At that time we were giving them something more than $6 million in military aid each year. They were very worried that it had gone down from $12 million the year before. I said, “I can promise you it's going to go to nothing if you don't solve this, because the key thing here is that no American taxpayer is going to want any penny of his money spent in an army that murders an American citizen and then covers up the murder. That's just not acceptable behavior.”

Again, it was still too soon—they hadn't really realized the sea change in our human rights policies caused by all the events I've described. They didn't really believe we would take action, so the army stonewalled us. They just flat wouldn't cooperate. They really did cover up. The captain in command of the murder squad was Hugo Contveras. He was known

as Hugo, El Maldilo, Hugo the bad guy, the evil one. There was a Captain, from the secret service who was involved in covering up the crime. I forget the name of the colonel in the military district of Santa Elena, who gave the order to “controlas.” In Spanish it means control, and it also has the state of the art meaning of, that's okay to kill him.

We had it cold. We had the reports both from the Military Defense Attach# and from the CIA station. They had gotten information out of the army. There were enough dissenting army officers who were telling us, and we were sure of what we had.

So when they stiffed us, I got absolutely furious, and again I have nothing but good things to say about my relationship with Bernie in this regard. I called him and said, “I think we ought to cut off the military aid. These guys think we're kidding.” It had taken me from June until October to get to this point. We had several telephone calls and I even came back to Washington in November of 1990 for this. So the decision was made. We were now in the time period when the first election of 1990 had been held, and 26 percent of the vote went Jorge Carpio, and 24 percent of the vote went for Serrano, with all the rest splitting up the difference. So there was going to have to be run-off election in December or January.

We knew that Serrano now had an excellent chance of being president. We knew that he would not want the fact that we had cut off military aid to happen on his watch. He would want it to happen on the Cerezo watch because it was Cerezo's refusal to interfere with the army that caused the problem. Cerezo had been scared by two previous coup attempts. So it was decided that we would cut off military aid just as quickly as we could get it done, which turned out to be the first week of December 1990.

Q: I think we missed just the last half of the last sentence.

STROOCK: Well, the decision to cut off military aid in December, still while on the Cerezo watch, and still while Bolanos was Minister of Defense, caused a true sensation and much consternation. They didn't believe we were going to do it, even though I warned them it was coming several times. The official announcement came from Washington D.C. out of

the Defense Department. I had had to talk to Dick Cheney about that, which was fun to do because he doesn't generally get mixed up in $6 million deals in Guatemala, but I did get through and talk to him. Dick has always been more than kind, and more than helpful, and more than generous with me.

So we cut off the military aid, and you know, that was a thunder clap. From then on out, we got verbal assurances that they were working on it. And we eventually got the five poor sons of bitches, the privates who did it, 30 years in jail. But we never were able to get the colonel in Santa Elena who I think was the intellectual author of it. Someday I'm going to write a book about the twists and turns of the legalities of how we finally got Captain Hugo Contravas before a court, and caught him in several lies. The court finally condemned him to 18 years, and he went to jail. But guess what? The first night he was in jail he escaped. Isn't that miraculous? In a military jail? And he still hasn't been caught. But the very fact that he was convicted, that we pushed it, and that we still have not returned to military aid for the Guatemalan army was pretty impressive.

When I talk about military aid you have to understand that there are all kinds of games played with military aid. We froze the official, authorized, up-front, everybody sees it, and its accounted for military aid. There was about $10 million worth of military aid in the pipeline from previous authorizations that had been agreed upon, trucks, boots, Quonset huts, medical supplies, ambulances, that kind of thing—that we stopped. So we really froze about $16 million worth of aid. Once the privates were in prison, then—as evidence of good faith—and as evidence that we wouldn't just beat them with a stick, we determined to release about half the military aid that was in the pipeline. Then, once Contravas was convicted—even though he “escaped”—we gave them some more military aid. We still had about $6 million frozen when Serrano came to me and said, “Look, I'm having terrible problems with the military. I'm going to appoint a new Defense Minister, I'm going to get rid of General Mendoza who says he is helping me, but really is not. I'm going to put in a

general named Garcia Samayoa. When I do that I want you to turn loose the rest of the military aid to give Garcia Samayoa a good start in his job."

It seemed to me that that was the right thing to do. We had a country team meeting, the Defense Attach# urged me to do it, and his judgment was good, and so did the station chief. The political officers thought it wouldn't hurt, it wouldn't help. He was of two minds about it. And the Public Affairs Officer, Jim Carroll by that time, said it would play very badly in the United States, but who gives a damn how it played in the United States. Could we get the army to move forward? So we released the rest of it.

All of the time we're dealing with the army on human rights violations. I'm just describing two or three of the most obvious cases, there were many more. We should take time to cover the Maria Unudia__ case. There were many others, perhaps one a week. All the while this was going on we still were fighting the drug war. We still needed the army to help us with it. So through secret funds the CIA has, we were indeed helping the army. So while publicly we're saying, you're bad boys and we're not going to give you this aid, around the back door we are helping them. It's a very difficult and ambivalent situation.

I pressed the whole time I was in Guatemala for someone to unscramble... This was a decision that was bigger than mine to make. I'm not the one to decide whether the United States government pays more attention to human rights violations, or to drug interdiction. But I was begging for someone up there to make that decision because we were sending totally mixed signals. Not publicly. Publicly—as far as the civilian population was concerned, as far as the government was concerned—we were squarely on the side of human rights and drug interdiction, and the two did not interfere with each other. But in the actual workings of the machinery of how these were accomplished, the people involved in it, we were giving terribly mixed signals and I think we still are.

Q: That decision was never made then?

STROOCK: That decision was never made. To my knowledge, it has not yet been made. It's a very difficult one to make. It's easy for me to sit here and say, this is the one we ought to do, but it's very difficult for our government to do that. If we make that decision, what decision do they make in the neighboring countries, and how does that affect our relationships with Peru, and Colombia, and Bolivia, and so on.

Q: We need to quit there. Thanks.

End of interview